



Settlement Services Training

Module 3: Writing Case Notes

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IMPORTANT

For the best learning experience, view this module (PDF document) in Adobe Reader. Please save the PDF document to your desktop with a click of your right mouse button and re-open it in Adobe Reader. Failing to do this may mean you are not able to see the glossary terms when you mouse over them or be able to return to where you left off in the PDF after clicking on a link.

Acknowledgements

Produced by the Immigration Policy and Programs Branch of the Ministry of Jobs, Tourism and Skills Training and Minister Responsible for Labour with contributions and support from the WelcomeBC Training Committee, settlement sector working group volunteers, and professional services from Penny Handford Consulting.

Module 3: Writing Case Notes

Welcome to the third module in the Settlement Services Training module series. This module is designed to encourage and explain best practices in case note writing for settlement workers who provide case management services.



Through completing this module you will have the tools necessary to:

- understand why case notes are important documentation in case management
- understand privacy protection requirements and how to manage case notes
- write effective case notes that follow best practices in format and content

You will notice that some of the words are in **blue**. This means that word is a glossary term. If you are viewing this on your computer, click or roll your cursor over the word to see the definition. These words are also found in the glossary at the end of the module.

This module has three parts:

- Part A: Why and When to Write Case Notes
- Part B: Privacy and Confidentiality with Case Notes
- Part C: The Format and Content of Case Notes

This module should take you 40–60 minutes to complete. Once you complete the module, please complete the evaluation survey to help us improve the training.

Part A: Why and When to Write Case Notes

The Purpose of Case Notes

Case notes provide important information that can help you manage cases. Taking the time to write good case notes is an important part of case management.

Case notes are important because they:

- provide a reminder of interactions with a service user as you may see hundreds of service users
- provide a reminder for the service user who may become overwhelmed and forget useful information about the services they've received or information they've provided.
- document referrals to programs and services
- document decisions made and the rationale for those decisions
- keep track of a service user's progress and set backs
- identify emerging challenges and barriers which may require revisions of a service user's action plan
- provide for cultural insights on reflection and to others legally authorized to read the notes and prevent cultural misunderstandings
- provide background on a service user if a case is transferred to another settlement worker's case load
- can sometimes be used and disclosed as evidence in some legal matters, for example in the case of child abuse or neglect, domestic violence or other possible criminal offenses
- can provide information to help a client e.g., dates of service can help prove duration of residency if a service user requests a letter for the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA)

As a settlement worker, you may not like spending time writing case notes and prefer to spend your time and energy on direct service user interactions. While documenting the process can sometimes seem like a nuisance, proper record keeping by case notes can be a vital source of information for service excellence.

It can be challenging to write case notes because it takes time and it is often difficult to sort out what to include and what to leave out. In Part C, you'll learn more about what to include in case notes. However, it may take some time and guidance from a supervisor or experienced colleague before you feel confident writing case notes.

Your organization will have standards, policies, and procedures relating to documentation of service user interactions. Please ask your supervisor to review your organization's policy on case note writing with you if you are unfamiliar with it. This module will provide a general overview and description of best practices related to case note writing. The content in this module is meant to compliment training you receive from your organization.

A note about possible readers of case notes...

Case notes are highly confidential and are used to document the service received. These notes may be disclosed to others who have the legal authority to read them such as:

- another settlement worker when the file is transferred to them permanently or temporarily while you are away or unavailable;
- a supervisor, if an issue arises with the service user or when a supervisor reviews your performance;
- the service user; and
- possibly to law enforcement or in legal proceedings.

Individuals can make formal access requests for a copy of their personal information in the case notes in a file whenever they want. It is important to recognize that your opinion of the individual as noted in case notes are the individual's personal information and will be released to him or her on request.

Case notes are strictly confidential and must never be disclosed to anyone beside the individual they are about unless you have that individual's written consent. There are other circumstances where case notes may be lawfully disclosed. For more information refer to the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* at http://www.bclaws.ca/EPLibraries/bclaws_new/document/ID/freeside/96165_00.

The Benefits of Case Notes for Settlement Organizations

- Provides evidence of services provided and that service providers have followed legal requirements for documentation and reporting
- Documents client progress towards goals, effectiveness of an action plan and collectively can provide service user outcome statistics for the organization
- Aids with the orienting staff when transferring cases among staff
- Keeps settlement service workers accountable to the service user and the organization
- Provides information for supervisors to lead case supervision coaching discussions
- Assists the organization and/or board members when issued a request for documented evidence including providing a defence for accusations of or improper service delivery

When to Write Case Notes

Case notes can be written at various stages of the case management process but the diagram below outlines three important stages that case note documentation is usually recorded in the service user's file.



While service organizations are not required to submit all case notes to the Province, the Province can request to review case files at any time as part of regular contract monitoring.

Part B: Privacy and Confidentiality with Case Notes

While case notes are a valuable record of the services provided, they must also respect a service user's . In addition, service users may disclose highly sensitive information that could cause harm to service users if inappropriately disclosed to a family member, legal professional or other third party and so strict practices also need to be in place. The individual case note writer and the organization could be held responsible and could be fined if they breach the service user's privacy.

Care must be taken when recording any information of a sensitive nature. This information can include a service user's:

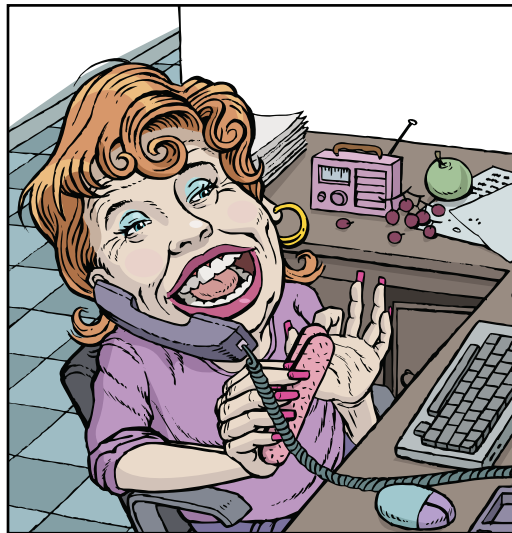
- living arrangements and address
- relationship status
- financial status
- psychiatric/medical history or conditions including treatments, prescriptions, etc.
- evidence of addictions: drugs, alcohol, gambling, etc.
- experience with violence
- use of with children
- cultural practices that are not the norm in Canada
- legal matters (i.e., criminal history or involvement, past or current charges or violations of the law)

This type of information, if improperly collected, used or disclosed may lead to service users being discredited in a legal matters or denied services or supports. It could also lead to a privacy breach being alleged against the settlement worker and the organization. When you record sensitive information in case notes, it is very important that you only include verifiable facts when documenting sensitive information. Some examples of verifiable information include:

- diagnosis based on medical documentation
- learning disabilities based on test results from certified professionals
- protection order (peace bond or restraining order) information based on legal documentation

Activity: Carrie Careless

Carrie Careless isn't too concerned about sharing personal and confidential information. Click on the image below to see what information Carrie is sharing and the potential consequences of her actions.



Privacy Legislation – FIPPA and Service User Personal Information

Canadian privacy laws require that organizations and agencies only collect and record sensitive information if it is absolutely necessary to provide a particular service. This concept is reinforced by government contract language.

Some important guidelines based on the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* (FIPPA) that are reinforced by Settlement (SIP and VIPP) contracts¹ are:

- As a settlement service provider under SIP or VIPP, you are acting for the Provincial Government when you providing services. For this reason, the Province has an important role in the protection of personal information that you gather on behalf of the government
- Only record personal information that is necessary for the provision of service
- Collect personal information directly from the individual the information is about
- Tell the service user:
 - the purpose for collecting the personal information;
 - what legal authority you have for collecting it;
 - the contact information for someone within your organization that can answer their questions about the collection, use and disclosure of their personal information; and
 - that there is an independent body, the Office of the Information and Privacy Commissioner of BC (and give service users the website address <http://www.oipc.bc.ca/>) they can contact with any questions or concerns about the information you are collecting.
- Make sure the information collected is accurate, especially if the information determines service eligibility.

¹ Note that the privacy legislation that applies will vary from program to program depending on the nature of the services provided. The information in this module applies to SIP and VIPP service provision only.

- If a service user or third party requests to see a service user's file or suggests a change to personal information e.g., a name change, this is called "a request for access to information" or request. Notify your supervisor immediately as they will need to be promptly advised of how to make the request to the BC Government in writing.
- Personal information must be securely stored within Canada (including files on servers) and not be at risk for unauthorized access, collection, use, disclosure or disposal.
- If there is a breach in security and personal information has been disclosed without authorization, you must alert your supervisor immediately.



Exceptions to these guidelines may exist in special circumstances. Your supervisor will be able to let you know if this is the case. Please discuss any concerns you have with your supervisor.

For more information refer to the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* at http://www.bclaws.ca/EPLibraries/bclaws_new/document/ID/freeside/96165_00.

Activity: Delicia Diligent

In this case study you learn how to handle a request for information from a legal professional. Click on the image below and see what information Delicia Diligent from the law firm Smith and Smith is requesting and how you should handle her request.



Storage of Case Note Records

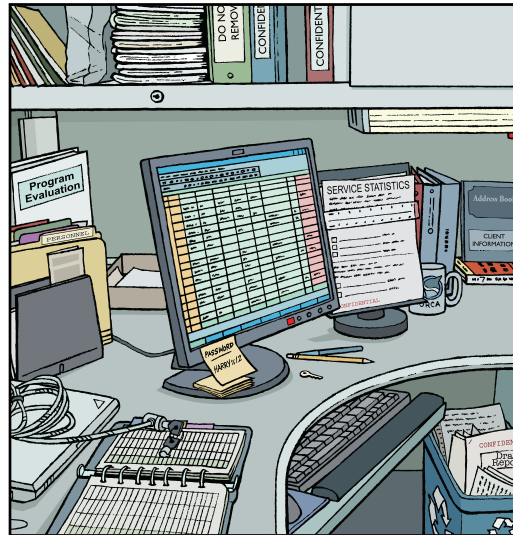
Paper records with personal service user information such as case notes should be stored in a locked filing cabinet or file drawer and accessible only to those strictly authorized to see them. Do not leave paper or electronic documents and files where unauthorized personnel may have access to them e.g., your desk, unprotected computer or car. It is not acceptable, for example, to leave a file with case notes on your desk overnight.

Electronic case notes and other data in stored in computers must be protected with passwords and secured with firewall systems. Also, it is important to not transmit confidential information by email.

If you are conducting a home visit, take minimal paper or electronic documentation with you, and ensure that the paper and electronic records are returned to your secure office record storage. Do not leave case notes or files in your car or trunk overnight. Please consult with your organization's policy regarding storage of service user documentation.

Activity: Securing your Workspace

Securing your workspace at the end of the day is an important step in the protection of private information. Click on the image below to see if you can identify the 13 security mistakes.



Confidentiality with Case Notes

In addition to privacy considerations, it is also important to practice confidentiality with personal information from service providers. When you were hired, you signed a confidentiality agreement with your employer. Volunteers with your organization must also sign a confidentiality agreement. Your signature on that document is your commitment to keeping personal information from service users confidential.

As part of intake, your organization will ask service users to sign an informed consent form or section. Service users need to understand what they are signing. It is important to take the time to explain that signing the consent form allows you to collect their personal information and record it within case notes and forms but only so you can provide services to them. Explain to service users that you take confidentiality seriously and respect that service users trust you with their information. Explain that you will not disclose their personal information to

other parties (including family members) without their consent in writing unless the disclosure is required by law. Service users must remain in control of whether their information is shared with a third party.

However, there is one important exception; confidentiality does not apply when disclosure is necessary to prevent serious, foreseeable and imminent harm to a client or others.

Mandatory Reporting of Suspected Child Abuse

BC law says that anyone who believes a child has been abused or neglected — or is likely to be abused or neglected — must report it to the Ministry of Children and Family Development. Ministry staff cannot tell anyone the name of a person who reports child abuse. This is so people won't be afraid to report when they think a child is being harmed.

Your organization will have specific policies and procedures in place for reporting child abuse so please review policies and procedures with your supervisor. The following guidelines are generally accepted procedures.

Call a child protection worker at your local district office of the Ministry of Children and Family Development (listed in the blue pages of your phone book) or the Help Line For Children – Dial 310-1234 (no area code needed).

The child protection worker will:

- Determine if the child needs protection.
- Contact the police if a criminal investigation is required and coordinate a response with other agencies, if necessary.

If a child is in immediate danger, call the police to intervene and contact a child protection worker to determine whether the child is in need of protection.

What to Report:

- the child's name and age
- the child's location
- your relationship to the child
- any immediate concerns about the child's safety
- information on the situation including all physical and behavioural indicators you have observed
- information about the family, parents and alleged offenders
- the nature of the child's disabilities, if any
- other child(ren) who may be affected
- information about other persons or agencies closely involved with the child and/or family
- any other relevant information concerning the child and/or family such as language and culture
- your name (your name will be kept confidential)
- your phone number

Don't wait until you have all this information before calling. Just tell the child protection worker as much as you know.

Activity: Help Wally Wrong Get it Right!

Wally Wrong is a settlement worker who handles personal and sensitive service user information and he just can't seem to get it right! His actions can cause information breaches. Click on the following image, to see if you can help Wally get it right.



A note about the activities in this module: Carrie Careless and Wally Wrong...

These examples of settlement workers are meant to be exaggerated examples of bad practice to help you learn from an illustrated example of how not to perform with respect to privacy and confidentiality. The Ministry has faith that settlement workers are professionals and that they take privacy and confidentiality seriously.

Part C: The Format and Content of Case Notes

Case notes should be written as soon as possible after the session with the service user. Memories and accuracy begin to fade quickly and this may result in the omission of important information. It is best to finish the documentation on the case before you leave the office for the day.

How to Write Case Notes

Case notes should:

- be clear and brief
- be concise and precise
- be specific, accurate and complete
- be timely

- be readable with acceptable grammar
- describe relevant observed behaviours of service users without personal judgement or interpretation
- briefly document relevant service users' verbal statements and questions without personal judgement
- record observations — which should be as objective as possible
- substantiate conclusions and decisions with evidence and facts
- link documentation to service delivery decisions
- be proofread for spelling, grammar and clarity

Case notes should not:

- contain personal
- use in place of names i.e., he, she, they, etc.
- use or abbreviations that are unique to your organization
- contain
- contain
- contain
- contain and
- use language such as "mankind" or "policeman"

Exercise 1: Examples of Case Notes

Please take a break from reading the content and click on the button to the right or go online (type this URL into your browser: http://www.mytrainingbc.ca/SST/media/quiz/welcomebc_mod3_quiz1/welcomebc_mod3_quiz1.htm) to take the self-assessment quiz. Your answers will not be recorded, but if you get a question wrong, you will learn what the correct answer is. This will help you check to see if you have understood what you have read.

Exercise

The SOAP Model of Case Note Writing

The acronym SOAP (Subjective, Objective, Assessment, Plan) can be a useful tool to ensure that case notes describe the complete picture. These guidelines offer one possible approach to case note writing that may be useful for some settlement workers.

S – Subjective

This is the information told to the Settlement Worker by the service user. It is an unbiased report of the service user's feelings, concerns, thoughts and intentions.

O – Objective

This information is factual and quantifiable. There are two sources of this type of information:

- **Settlement Counsellor's Observations:** This could include the client's appearance, affect, behaviour and so on. It is important for the Settlement Worker not include judgements. For example the Settlement Worker should **not** record:

"Joanne arrived drunk to this session and was rude, obnoxious and uncooperative."

A better way to record the observation is to document the facts:

"Joanne smelled of alcohol; speech was slow and deliberate; unsteady on feet; uncontrollable giggles after stumbling against a doorframe."

- **Materials and documentation from other professionals:** This could include reports, letters or other material from CIC, a physician or other professional.

A – Assessment

After reviewing the facts, Settlement Workers may make recommendations for actions or suggested referrals based on their professional experience. These recommendations should follow the subjective and objective findings recorded within the case notes.

For example, if a service user cries uncontrollably and demonstrates erratic behaviour and has been through a traumatic event, a Settlement Worker may suspect the service user is experiencing

However, the Settlement Worker does not have the qualifications to make such a diagnosis and would need to make a recommendation only:

“Cecile reports that she often cries uncontrollably and has outbursts of anger. Given Cecile’s reports of experience with torture, will recommend assessment for PTSD.”

P – Plan

This involves documenting any action planning which the Settlement Worker and the service user do together or any changes to a current action plan.

Other Information to Include in a Case Note

While it is important that case notes contain important information, they are not meant to be lengthy. Case notes should always include:

- the client’s name and agency identification number²
- the date the case note was written
- the name of the settlement worker making the case note
- the date informed consent documentation is completed
- if applicable, dates of any release of information to a

Other information that can be useful to record:

- cancelations and rescheduling of appointments
- next meeting dates
- name of forms and date they were completed
- whether the meeting was in-person or on the phone

A note about editing case notes...

Case notes should not be amended by whiting out or deleting information that changes the record. If you want to delete something, cross it off and initial it. As case notes may be used as evidence in court, it is important that they remain unaltered. If circumstances have changed or there is new information, the best practice is to create a new case note with the correct information and refer to the error in the previous case note.³

² Please consult with your organization’s policy on what client identification information to include. For example, some agencies may require Settlement Workers to include the client’s date of birth on all documents.

³ Section 4.25, BC College of Social Workers, Standards of Practice

Exercise 2: Hoa Nguyen Case Study

PART A

Please read the following transcript from a conversation a settlement worker (Jane) had with a service user, Hoa Nguyen:

Jane: *Hello Hoa, it is nice to meet you.*

Hoa: *Hello Jane, it is nice to meet you too.*

Jane: *Can you tell me about your arrival to Canada?*

Hoa: *My husband Vihn and I moved here two years ago with my son, Mihn. Mihn is 13. Vihn and I took ELSA classes when we first arrived, but Vihn stopped after two weeks. He said he found it too difficult. Vihn thinks he is too old to learn English. He relies on me and Minh to explain things to him. Vihn is depressed. He doesn't like Canada.*

Jane: *Really, why is that?*

Hoa: *In Vietnam, Vihn was a very important person. He had a good job with the government; people came to him for advice. Now he is in Canada and he has no friends and no English. He is very depressed. He spends his day at home.*

Jane: *Do you work?*

Hoa: *Yes, working is new for me. I work two jobs right now, in a hotel. I like my jobs. I've met many friends and practice my English. But I am frustrated with Vihn. He doesn't look for work. When I try to talk to him, he says he will not wash dishes and gets very mad. Sometimes he slaps me or pushes me up against a wall. I don't like Mihn to see that. [Hoa starts to cry.]*

PART B

Click on the button to the right or go online (type this URL into your browser: http://www.mytrainingbc.ca/SST/media/quiz/welcomebc_mod3_quiz2/welcomebc_mod3_quiz2.htm) to take the self-assessment quiz. Your answers will not be recorded, but if you get a question wrong, you will learn what the correct answer is. This will help you check to see if you have understood what you have read.

Exercise

Words to Use and Avoid When Writing Case Notes

When describing the actions you took as a settlement worker, the following verbs can be used:

- advised
- assessed
- assisted
- clarified
- counselled
- discussed
- directed
- encouraged
- focused
- identified
- recommended
- referred
- reflected
- structured
- summarized
- supported
- urged

When documenting the actions and behaviours of service users, judgemental words should be avoided such as:

- abnormal
- delusional
- disturbed
- hysterical
- immature
- impulsive
- incompetent
- irrational
- troubled
- uncooperative
- unfit

Final Quiz

Congratulations! You have now completed the module. To review your understanding of what you have learned, please take this self-evaluation. Please note that your results are not being recorded, so you may take the quiz as many times as you wish.

Click on the button to the right or go online (type this URL into your browser: http://www.mytrainingbc.ca/SST/media/quiz/welcomebc_mod3_quizfinal/welcomebc_mod3_quizfinal.htm).

Final Quiz

Please also give us your feedback on this module by completing the evaluation survey.

Click on the button to the right or go online and use this address in your browser, <http://fluidsurveys.com/s/gp-mod3-evaluation/>

Feedback

Thank you. Your feedback will help us improve this tool.

Appendix A: Glossary

Acronyms: a word formed from the initial letters of other words, e.g., CIC is an acronym for Citizen and Immigration Canada

Clichés: a stereotyped expression; a sentence or phrase, usually expressing a popular or common thought or idea, that has lost originality and impact by long overuse

Confidentiality: a set of rules or a promise that limits access or puts restrictions on certain types of information

Corporal punishment: any punishment in which physical force is used and intended to cause some degree of pain or discomfort, however light

Economic class immigrant: Immigrants selected for their ability to participate in the labour market and to establish themselves economically in Canada.

Diagnosis (medical): refers both to the process of attempting to determine or identify a possible disease or disorder

Gender specific: characteristic of, or limited to either males or females

FOI: Freedom of Information describes the capacity for governments to provide timely and accurate access to information (data) concerning government services

Jargon: the specialized or technical language of a trade, profession, or similar group

Judgements: the process of forming an opinion or evaluation using personal experience or based on values of the person judging

Negligence: conduct that falls below the standards of behaviour established by law for the protection of others against unreasonable risk of harm

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD): an anxiety disorder associated with serious traumatic events and characterized by such symptoms as survivor guilt, reliving the trauma in dreams, numbness and lack of involvement with reality, or recurrent thoughts and images

Prejudices: a negative judgment or opinion formed beforehand or without knowledge or examination of the facts

Privacy: freedom from the intrusion of others in one's private life or affairs

Pronouns: a word used instead of a noun (or a phrase containing a noun), e.g., he, it, who and they

Stereotypes: a set of inaccurate, simplistic generalizations about a group that allows others to categorize them and treat them accordingly

Third party: a person or group besides the two primarily involved in a situation, transaction or contract

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